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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: NORTH KOREA, U.S.-CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

¶1. Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies focused February 5 news coverage on the island's sagging economy, on the ongoing probe into former President Chen Shui-bian's legal cases, and on thousands of people in Taiwan paying homage to Dharma Master Sheng Yen, who passed away Tuesday. In terms of editorials and commentaries, a column in the centrist, KMT-leaning "China Times" discussed the options that U.S. President Barack Obama has in the wake of Pyongyang's recent announcement to annul all its agreements signed with Seoul. An op-ed piece in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times," on the other hand, discussed U.S.-China-Taiwan relations and said only that by "maintaining a positive and balanced relationship with the U.S. and China" can Taiwan ensure that its "best national interests are met." End summary.

¶2. North Korea

"Obama's Options in terms of the [United States'] Korean Policy"

The "International Lookout" column in the centrist, KMT-leaning "China Times" [circulation: 150,000] wrote (2/4):

"In the wake of an announcement that it would annul all the agreements it signed with Seoul, Pyongyang stepped up its rhetoric by saying that 'a military conflict and war that is unpreventable and inevitable' will likely be triggered between South Korea and the North. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak appeared to be quite composed [with regard to Pyongyang's statement]. Why? This is because he is awaiting Washington's reaction. ...

"Pyongyang, without a doubt, is clearly aware of the United States' position. Given that the South Korean government has abandoned the attempt to reconcile [with Pyongyang] and tensions have escalated again on the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang certainly would not let Washington get what it wants. Instead, it wants to push the tension to its extreme and force the United States to show the 'true colors' of its [Korean] policy. Lee's gambling stake, as it turned out, was bet on the fact that Washington does not want to see tensions [completely] eradicated on the Korean Peninsula. Japan, of course, prefers that the United States remain tough and North Korea and the South break off their reconciliation efforts. As a result, [U.S. President Barack] Obama is facing a multiple-choice question: He can either admit the fact that Pyongyang is in possession of nuclear weapons and start negotiations on such a basis, or he can disregard Pyongyang's warnings and be prepared to cope with increased likelihood of military conflicts on the Korean Peninsula. Whichever option he picks, they will both violate [U.S.] strategic principles and interest."

¶3. U.S.-China-Taiwan Relations

"Balancing Relations with China and the US"

Dr. Alexander Huang, a professor in the Graduate Institute of International Affairs and Strategic Studies at Tamkang University, opined in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times"

[circulation: 30,000] editorialized (2/5):

"In a call to Chinese President Hu Jintao 10 days after his inauguration, US President Barack Obama promised cooperation between the two powerhouses and expressed hopes of building more constructive relations. Only by maintaining a positive and balanced relationship with the US and China can our government ensure that Taiwan's best national interests are met. ... China plays a significant role in the US government's economic and financial policies. However, there is a difference in how Obama and Hu protect their interests. While Obama stressed the need to correct global trade imbalances and stimulate economic growth and restore credit markets, Hu opposed trade and investment protectionism as ways of solving the crisis. ...

"How the US and China handle their economic and trade relations will also indirectly affect the prospects of Taiwanese businesspeople in China as well as the nation's economic cooperation agreement with China. Media have reported that Obama and Hu seemed to avoid discussing human rights, religion and Taiwan. This might lead pessimists to assume that the Obama administration will not pay sufficient attention to relations with Taiwan or stand up for US founding values, such as democracy and freedom. But those concerned about Taiwan-US relations should keep two key points in mind. First, the US and China are big countries with global clout, and cross-strait issues are not always the primary concern in their complex web of relationships on the global, regional and bilateral level.

"Second, Obama's conversation with Hu focused on the most pressing issues between the two countries. Having Taiwan as a focal point of US-China relations for the past 13 years has not necessarily been a blessing for the Taiwanese public or the nation's interests. There is now an opportunity for a thaw in cross-strait relations, and this also sets the conditions for restoring mutual trust in Taiwan-US relations. Taiwan's government and opposition should prioritize the interests and well-being of the public and strive for sustainable economic development to create a healthy, win-win-win situation for the US, China and Taiwan early in Obama's presidency."

YOUNG